

Concept Paper

On the Hunt for Noble Savages: Romance Tourism and Ageing Femininities

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Abstract: Casual sexual encounters are closely wedded to leisure travel, and have received a lot of attention in both theoretical and empirical work. However, the relationship between romance tourism and female ageing remains largely under-researched. This article offers critical insights into the interplay of the successful ageing and sexual relationships abroad of older women travellers. It shows that romance tourism has both positive and negative implications for women's physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Although exotic escapes help reconnect women with their youthful selves, enhancing a sense of self-confidence and challenging the narrative of decline, casual sex may also generate conflicting feelings once the travel romance is over. This article also encourages the rethinking of the complexities of ageing femininities, sexual activity and health risk in 'silver' romance tourism today. Additionally, it argues that the sexual health guidelines and information campaigns should adopt a more multifaceted approach to sexual expressions, and encourage alternative views towards sex and sexuality in later life, in order to not create a rather oppressive ideology among older women.

Keywords: leisure travel; romance tourism; sexuality; successful ageing; later life; older women; gender

1. Introduction

Holidaying is often regarded as an opportunity to let go of a sense of responsibility and to free oneself from social roles, everyday constraints and routine [1–4]. Sometimes, the ludic nature of leisure tourism may even prompt people to disregard the ethical values of a travel destination and act in ways that are contradictory to regular social norms in their home country. As Ryan observes, the “clerical workers on the 18–30 holidays who drink too much, eat too much, create too much noise in rowdy games and disco all night long, do actually return home to their 9-to-5 jobs and their respectability” [2] (p. 76). Similarly, Gottlieb states that:

Many Americans like to envision vacation as ‘time off’—in a sense, the denial of time as one conceives it. One should make love all day, or stay up all night and sleep in the day, denying the ‘normal’ rituals of the temporal sequence. Some vacationers even leave their watches home as a clear symbol of adapting to a non-normal ‘schedule’, eating when they are hungry instead of when the clock tells them so, and so on. [5] (p. 170)

In other words, displacement from a familiar environment is often seen as an expression of a social escape from daily reality, into a dream-like play-space that cannot be found at home [1,2]. Leaving one's comfort zone also entices people to become more libertine and less constrained, which may eventually trigger sexual desire [1,2,4,6–11]. Very often, travelling and sexual activity are linked in the form of freedom to pursue relaxation, pleasurable experiences, and sexual satisfaction in novel recreational environments away from home [1,2,6–11]. The appeal to sex and sexuality has often been used by the tourism industry to develop and promote attractive aspects of a travel destination. By employing “the power of sex, the mass media has commercialized and exploited sexuality as a marketing tool for an enormous variety of goods and services, many of which have in themselves little

to do with matters of human sexuality” [11] (pp. 14–15). In fact, “sex from a romantic viewpoint has often been utilized in the selling of the holiday product” [2] (p. 321). Relatedly, Hart and Hawkes argue that “[t]ogether with travel, sex is one of the world’s most common forms of pleasure. Not infrequently, the two activities coincide” [12] (p. 168). The inclusion of sex in the four ‘S’s, namely, sun, sea, sand and sex, also shows that sex is often an integral part of the tourist experience [1,2,8,11,13]. According to Prideaux and colleagues:

The underlying message remains the same: an appeal to sexual fantasy. The use of images with a sexual connotation to attract tourists is not new, and as early as the 1920s promotional brochures for Hawaii produced by Pan Am showed images of bare-breasted native women beckoning tourists to visit Hawaii in an era when the normal female swimming costume was of a neck-to-knee design. [11] (p. 8).

Countries such as Jamaica, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Gambia, Kenya, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Brazil, among others, are internationally renowned as sex tourism destinations. Yet, it is also important to mention that apart from international sex tourism in developing countries, there are other types of mobilities that intersect with sex tourism. Such flows involve domestic tourists interested in areas of their own countries that contain red-light districts, which are not economically viable in secondary and tertiary towns, or tourists who travel between developed countries with different legislative frameworks, such as the Netherlands.

Although sex is an important aspect in international travelling, there are many gaps and contradictions that need further investigation, in both theoretical and empirical works [8,10]. Berdychevsky and Carr argue that “sex as leisure is a novel (and potentially uncomfortable) idea to the researchers and practitioners as well as to the general public” [9] (p. 2). Scholars studying sex are often ostracised, and their work is frequently perceived as less legitimate; such predispositions have also affected sex as a topic for leisure scholars [9,14]. In fact, sex remains a taboo and, paradoxically, is often silenced in contemporary youth- and sex-oriented society [9,15]. Also, there is little attention given to casual and non-commercial sexual activities in later life in the fields of age and leisure tourism studies, especially with regards to older women [7–9].

This paper focuses on older women rather than older men because, ageing women’s sexual travelling is almost invisible in sex-related tourism research. Moreover, older women are subjected to negative notions of ageing and often perceived as asexual, deformed, sagging and unappealing, which makes them even more vulnerable, unseen and ridiculed [7]. If, in contemporary western understandings of beauty and sexual appeal, grey hair and wrinkles translate into maturity and wisdom in men, in older women they are often seen as the antithesis of femininity, and as markers of grandmothering and nurturing. Therefore, older women are more likely than older men to experience discrimination, and be regarded as asexual and unattractive. By offering critical insights into the context of leisure tourism and sexuality in the light of successful ageing discourse, this study challenges the pejorative notions associated with ageing femininities, and fills the silences of older women who engage in sexual relations abroad. Additionally, it argues that the sexual health guidelines and information campaigns should adopt a more holistic approach towards the physical, emotional and sexual health and wellbeing of older women who seek romance and hedonistic experiences abroad. This article should be of interest to researchers and audiences interested in age, leisure tourism and women’s studies, as well as socio-cultural perspectives of sex-oriented travelling in later life.

2. The Complexities of Sex Tourism

For sexual encounters in tourism to exist, there must be people interested in sex travel, and local governments who legalise or knowingly ignore sex-related tourism [16]. The touristification and eroticisation of a place very often lead to sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking of women, prostitution, and commercial sexual mistreatment of children, especially visible in the developing countries [1,11,13]. For instance, the consumption of exotic sex and the perceived submissiveness and docility of Southeast Asian women is an attractive tourist product for many men from economically advanced countries, such as Japan and the US [11,13]. Thailand, especially, is regarded as the world’s

premier international sex destination [11,16,17]. The presence of prostitution in Thailand is due to its international political economy of labour, local commoditisation of sexual services, cultural conditions, the existence of patriarchy, and unequal international social relations [11,16,17]. The growth of commercialised prostitution in Thailand became intensified during the Vietnam War, with the presence of US military personnel who looked for entertainment and pleasure based on western traditions [16,17]. After the Vietnam War, the development of sex tourism and services in Thailand did not stop, as it coincided with the growth of mass tourism, disposable income, charter flights and cheaper international travelling, among other factors [16,17]. Even if prostitution in Thailand is illegal, its popular image of “an erotic destination has grown and competes with the exotic as a motivation for travel” [11] (p. 10). Although the convergence of sex and tourism often conjure up notions of prostitution, male domination and female sexual exploitation, female travellers also do seek erotic pleasures abroad. In fact, women tend to be more sexually active when on holiday than they are at home [18]. Economically well-off white North American and European older women, who look for temporal sexual fulfilment and holiday romances with young and poor locals, are especially visible in the Caribbean (Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Cuba), Southeast Asia and Africa [19–22].

2.1. Sex Tourism versus Romance Tourism

Some scholars recommend drawing a line between gendered sexual practices among men and women: men’s seeking sexual pleasure is commonly assumed as sex tourism, whereas a search of sexual fulfilment among women is denoted as romance tourism [19,22]. Romance tourism implies romantic, emotional and intimate relationships between economically affluent white foreign women and impoverished local men [19,22]. “Racialised, eroticized, and hypersexualized” male sex workers are often referred to “as beach boys, island boys, players, gigolos, sanky pankys, hustlers”, or called by other local terms [19] (p. 1), [22] (p. 1). A different naming helps to distance them from the stigma of prostitution and, instead, highlights romance, courtship play and emotional involvement, rather than a mere sex-for-money exchange [19,22]. The distinction between paid and unpaid sex tourism is also blurred through the exchange of gifts, accommodations, financial help, and other favours that female visitors offer to their exotic impoverished ‘beach boys’ [16,19,22]. However, the term romance tourism is controversial and ambiguous, and the differences between male and female sex tourism are not as big as assumed [19,21]. Sánchez-Taylor’s [21] study shows that male and female tourists’ motivations, behaviours and attitudes are, in fact, very similar—men travel to sunlust destinations to affirm their masculinity, whereas women strive to establish their femininity, self-appraisal, and a sense of ‘womanliness’. Both men and women who seek sexual pleasures in the international sex destinations tend to display a sense of racial superiority and economic power, thus making them similar in their pursuit of sex abroad [21]. Along the same lines, Berdychevsky states that “[s]cholars arguing against the distinction, placing women among the ranks of sex tourists, propose that the similarities lie in the privileged economic, class, and racial status of Western tourists vis-à-vis their local sexual partners” [19] (p. 1).

2.2. Erotic Escapes into the Exotic Savageness

While the word ‘exotic’ “embodies images of differentness in a place that is far removed from a person’s normal physical and social reality and is normally only able to be experienced through the act of undertaking a journey”, the word ‘erotic’, which comes from ‘eros’, the Greek word for love, implies “a range of sexual desires” [11] (p. 5). When combined, they convey powerful sexual images, especially visible in a touristic setting [11]. In fact, sex tourism in the developing countries is intensified by the construction of difference that is based on the dichotomy of savage vs. civilised, exotic vs. mundane, rich vs. poor, and sexual vs. repressive [21]. The popular media and travel advertising provide the westerners with a model of lifestyle that can be re-enacted in the developing countries, in which westerners can temporarily ‘live like kings’, and indulge in sexual pleasures that are offered by the sexualised and racialised ‘Others’ [21]. The difference of a travel destination also relates to the novelty

and erotic elements, that are presented as commodities for western mass consumption [13]. A visit to the exotic place away from home is often an experiment of difference that constitutes a temporary transcendence of the moral constraints, routines and social roles [13]. Additionally, descriptions of the exotic are frequently projections of escape, nostalgia, ideology, and an idealisation of ‘Others’ in terms of simplicity, illiteracy, romanticised savageness, and innocence [13]. Yet, Sánchez-Taylor [21] also argues that not all black ‘gigolos’ feel vulnerable or racialised. A young Cuban whom she interviewed stated that he would “rather be ‘caliente’ than be intelligent”, because being sexually appealing not only provided him with economic means, but also made him feel proud of being able to adjust to the sociocultural construction of Caribbean masculinity, in terms of hypersexuality and a greater sexual stamina in comparison to white western men [21] (p. 49). In fact, many local ‘beach boys’ did not feel ashamed of providing sex services and attention; on the contrary, they saw sexual exchanges as a means to make a living and as an expression of masculinity, virility and sexuality. [20,21].

2.3. *The Normalisation of Casual Sex*

Many media representations and travel advertisement not only help to promote sex tourism, but they also stimulate and normalise the erotic component of leisure travel by employing sexualised images of the locals and the allure of erotic practices [1,11,16,20]. As Bindel observes, some tour operators “add thinly veiled references to sex tourism for women as a marketing strategy” [20] (n/p). For instance, many beach bars in Jamaica tend to advertise cocktails with names that refer to male sexual organs and hypermasculinity, such as ‘Big Bamboo’, ‘Dirty Banana’ or ‘Jamaican Steel’ [20]. The appeal to sex in tourism blurs the line between commercial sex and international tourism to the extent that being open to new experiences and sexual adventures is regarded as a motivating factor among many contemporary pleasure-and-fun-seeking female tourists [16,18,20]. Studies show that those who look for romantic experiences in exotic surroundings with ‘noble savages’ are mainly middle-aged and/or older women, who have low self-esteem and/or have experienced failed relationships beforehand [20]. Very often, the levels of satisfaction with one’s holiday and the degree of achieved expectations determine the motivation for the next trip [2]. That is to say, if hedonism-seeking tourists have been provided with sexual pleasures, treated in expected ways, and made to feel desirable and attractive, they are more likely to return to the same travel destination in search of the fulfilment of their fantasies. The repetition of sex holidays increases the growth of the sex tourism industry, and contributes to the maximisation of its profit. These aspects demonstrate that sex tourism in the developing countries is always a manifestation of the complex interplay of unequal gender relations, class structures, low income, cultural traits, sexual roles, and socio-cultural, political and historical backgrounds [2,13]. Sex tourism today continues to echo social relations of power and the maintenance of local racialised identities, attitudes and practices that were formed during colonialism, which shows that the location of sex-related travel can never be separated from its social and political context [1,2,16,21].

3. Sex, Sexuality and Ageing Women

Older women’s interest in romance tourism may be due to various factors, including sociocultural and political transformations, and peer pressure, which may entice them to behave in ways which conform to the social ideals and cultural trends [18,23–27]. The cult of individualism and sexual identity, which is a socially learned behaviour, has become very important since the sexual revolution and the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s [1,28]. No longer restricted by patriarchal rule and religious teachings, and being able to sustain themselves economically, women were given a chance to voice out their needs and interrogate the traditional social roles, motherhood, and marriage. Due to more reliable forms of birth control, they could have an unlimited access to sex with multiple partners without fear of undesired pregnancy; in other words, sexuality was ‘liberated’, as it was separated from “a chronic round of pregnancy and childbirth” [29] (p. 26). The transformations in the perceptions of sex and sexual identity have especially influenced the female representatives of the baby-boom generation, who were the first to be exposed to sexual freedom and the concept of

free love. Yet, the changed notions of female autonomy, gender roles and women's sexual nature have also brought confusions about sex, concerning increased sexual permissiveness, casual sex and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) [1,18,28,29]. Very often, new sexual freedoms have led women to be considered as sexual objects, whose right to sex came to be seen as a duty [28]. Female sexual liberation has increased the sexualisation of women, whose social value was measured by their sexual desirability and their ability to attract men [18]. As Ryan states, "the sexual revolution of the 1970s, based on the emancipation from pregnancy due to 'the pill', went awry" [1] (p. 25).

3.1. Successful Ageing and Sexual Activity

The focus on the importance of sex in later life has also been echoed in the model of successful ageing that emerged in the US in the second half of the 20th century [26,27,30,31]. Its primary aim was to replace the negative constructions of old age as a stage marked by loss, frailty and decay, and to instead highlight the positive aspects of the process of growing older, such as active lives, anti-ageing ideals, and healthy and happy living [26,27,30–32]. Sexual functioning and its optimisation has been given a special emphasis within this discourse [26,27,31,33–35]. Sexual activity, associated with feelings of pleasure, a sense of closeness, and excitement, has become a sign of an individual's overall physical and psychological wellbeing, vitality, their sense of happiness, self-esteem, and the intimacy between partners in older adulthood [7,12,24–27,31,33–36]. In other words, sexual activity has been assumed as an indicator of the general quality of life, wellbeing and health of older people. Instead of challenging negative notions about ageing, old age, and the asexuality of older women, the model of successful ageing has created new pressures to conform to a normative heterosexual understanding of sexuality that is mainly focused on penetrative sex [26,27,30,31,33–36]. That is to say, although sex implies a variety of intimate expressions, the successful ageing discourse has highlighted a historical construction of sexuality that emphasises intercourse and orgasm as the normative and expected expressions of human sexuality [26,27,30,31,33–36]. Those older people who had always had little interest in sexual performance, and remain less sexually active or inactive in older age, may develop feelings of inadequacy and anxiety for not being able to conform to the ideals of successful ageing [27,37]. The sex-oriented notions of ageing 'well' may be especially problematic for older men, who are expected to adjust to the new hypermasculine model in which 'staying hard' and 'playing hard' are seen as the indicators of healthy living, 'real' manhood, and youthful identities in later life stages [27,31,34–37]. Yet, those individuals who regarded sex as a significant part of their lives are more likely to practise sex in later years, which is especially relevant to baby-boomers, who witnessed the ideals of the sexual revolution. For instance, in her latest fictional work, *Fear of Dying*, the contemporary American writer Erica Jong observes that sex, pleasure and "orgasm" have always been in the "bill of rights" of the post-war generation, which "never gave up sex" [38] (p. 150).

Apart from free love and sex, the representatives of the baby-boom generation have also championed autonomy, hedonistic leisure, self-expression and mass consumption. Having been part of the new consumer society that emerged during the 1960s, this cohort has taken the same leisure practices, spending habits and youthful lifestyle preferences into later years [39,40]. The growth of leisure tourism is especially visible in the representatives of this generation who look for novel experiences abroad, in order to reconnect with their youthful selves and experience new sensations [40–43]. The convergence of leisure seeking, the ideals of the sexual revolution, the Women's Liberation Movement and successful ageing, as well as pleasure-oriented consumption, are echoed in the female representatives of the baby-boom cohort who venture abroad to fulfil their hedonistic dreams and sexual fantasies. Research shows that romance tourism may have both positive and negative implications for older women's physical and psychological health and wellbeing [6,9].

3.2. Romance Tourism and Its Pleasures

Travelling is not only about visiting new places, but it is also a voyage of self-discovery, self-fulfilment, and empowerment [2–4,6,13,44]. It can be seen as a means to resist gendered

spaces, and as a source of excitement, novel experiences and self-development [2–4,6,13,44]. Female sexual desire, which has historically been constructed as passive and almost non-existent in comparison to active male sexual behaviour, can be reclaimed and revived in the context of romance tourism [18,44]. These notions are especially relevant to older women, who are perceived as asexual and unattractive in today's beauty- and youth-oriented society [7,9,23–27,32,35,39]. As Berdychevsky and Carr argue, leisure travel experiences can “serve as counter-normative settings, providing women with opportunities for sexual experimentation, transgressions, inversions of sexual roles, and empowerment” [9] (p. 6). From the perspective of the compensation hypothesis, holidaying is a way by which workers compensate for the deficiencies in a workplace, such as boredom, routine, work pressure or stress [2]. The compensation hypothesis perspective can be applied to romance tourism: those older women who have suffered from unhappy relationships, or lacked sexual activity and men's attention, often turn to sexual adventures with attractive ‘gigolos’ in sunlust destinations.

For instance, Barbara, a 50-year-old divorced British woman, “threw aside her inhibitions [in Jamaica] and realised she could behave in a way she would never dare to at home” [20] (n/p). For Barbara, “[going abroad] was like total freedom. Chris [a Jamaican lover] was all over [her] and [she] couldn't get enough of that beautiful body” [20] (n/p). She has reported being “showered” with compliments about her legs and hair, about how she smelled, and even about her exotic accent [20] (n/p). This appreciation made her feel worthy and appealing again: “Chris made me feel gorgeous and special straight away” [20] (n/p). Barbara's sexual encounter with Chris allowed her to reclaim her sexual identity and reconnect with her youthful self. Casual sexual activity abroad is clearly an expression of Barbara's reconfirmation of her femaleness, her individuality, her sexual identity and her self-confidence. A good mood and a lingering effect of a sense of fulfilment and happiness have been conceptualised as a sexual afterglow, which contributes to psychological wellbeing and self-esteem, and consequently shows the benefits of romance tourism [45]. The possibility of being active agents in sex and scrutinising male bodies is another motivation to embark on a sex trip for many female travellers. Sánchez-Taylor's [21] interviewed women stressed black men's fit, young and sexually appealing bodies as mere commodities that allowed affluent westerners to live out alternative sexual fantasies, and be in control of the perceived aggressive and savage masculinity. Moreover, in the context of romance tourism, gender-, class-, age- and race-related notions become inverted, since sexual relationships of older white women with younger black men are no longer seen as taboo [21]. White female westerners use their superiority and economic and class privileges to exploit the often exoticised and racialised ‘Others’ [11,21,46]. Bindel reports that those older women, who “would never consider being openly involved with a young black man back home feel free to do so while travelling and often use this as an example of their ‘anti-racism’” [20] (n/p). In sex destinations, women travellers are allowed to ‘consume’ young men's bodies for their own pleasure, without fear of being denigrated or denied honour at home [20,21].

Older women may also use romance tourism as a means of challenging and undoing the double standard of ageing and the narrative of decline, according to which they are labelled as invisible, asexual and unappealing [32]. By engaging in sexual relationships with young local men, they contest age-related stereotypes, and show that asexuality and the process of growing older are not correlated. Sex travelling allows older women “to sexualise their bodies in ways that would be difficult to achieve back home” [21] (p. 46). Being desirable and sexually appealing are especially important to women who tend to perceive themselves from the perspective of others, and, especially, from the external voyeuristic male gaze [47–50]. As Blaikie argues, women “remain under pressure to satisfy the male gaze or risk social invisibility by dint of losing their physical attractiveness” [51] (p. 191). Feeling sexually attractive also helps to define a woman's social and individual identity, which is a significant aspect in social interactions and relations with others [39,47–51]. Given that men's attention is often seen as a marker of femininity and desirability, being labelled as sexual generates feelings of self-worth and self-esteem towards oneself and the very process of growing older [47–50]. Disguised under the anonymity of a holiday, older women can engage in casual sex without fear of threatening their social

position and reputation at home [1,8,18]. In fact, a sense of anonymity abroad often operates as a catalyst to indulge in sexual activities [1–3,18]. Yet, as Thomas [18] observes, the anonymity of sexual pleasures abroad is not always guaranteed, since sex partners may threaten women's reputation back home, and cause psychological and physical damage.

3.3. *Romance Tourism and Its Dangers*

Traditionally, women associate sex with love and romance; hence, emotional implications, a sense of intimacy, and sentimental attachments are significant in women's overall experiences of sexual encounters [18]. However, temporal boundaries surrounding casual sex and romance in a travel destination can generate painful emotions and troubled feelings. Although male attention and sexual adventures help increase a sense of self-confidence and sexual subjectivity for women, romantic rendezvous abroad are temporal, and may subsequently lead to loneliness, psychological damage, and other serious ramifications when the 'happy holiday atmosphere' is over. Back home to 'reality,' older women may again experience ageism and western age-related notions about older women's asexuality and unattractiveness, which may leave them even more vulnerable and displaced.

Apart from emotional damage, casual sex abroad is also closely linked to over-indulgence in alcohol, especially in relation to one-night stands [18]. Alcohol is reported as a means of lessening personal inhibitions, easing uncomfortable situations, and increasing confidence to experiment with casual sex with strangers [18]. However, large quantities of alcohol are also reported to decrease the likelihood of having sex, because of its narcotic effects that may result in nausea, sickness or tiredness, which prevent sexual activity [18]. The possibilities of STDs and sexual violence are also very present in the context of sex tourism. A feeling of increased freedom, the alteration of normative inhibitions, and a desire for sexual experimentation when abroad are often related to unsafe sex and inconsistent condom use that, in turn, may lead to HIV and STDs infection [6,16]. It is also important to mention that women, in comparison to men, are more vulnerable to STDs and HIV caused by unsafe heterosexual sex acts [52]. Moreover, the dramatic global growth of the HIV epidemic is also partially linked to tourism, which has been intensified by globalisation, higher incomes, tourist marketing, and better infrastructures that allowed for a growth of mass tourism, business travel (which, in fact, accounts for huge amounts of the growth in travel), and the mixing of sexual networks from the 1990s onwards [16]. Although HIV is a global phenomenon, in the western mindset it is assumed as a problem of 'other' nations, and is depicted in highly radicalised overtones [16]. The fact that the response to STDs is condom use and fewer sex partners rather than non-penetrative sex also shows that sexual intercourse is regarded as the dominant and 'natural' construction of sexual expressions for all age groups [18]. However, condom use does not always lead to safe sex, since it cannot protect against the spread of STDs, emotional coercion, sexual abuse, and the subsequent physical and psychological damage [18]. These gendered aspects are especially pronounced in women as a result of their female condition. As Black argues, "[t]he fear of violence, sexual harassment and rape is a constant and all-pervasive restriction upon the actions of women both at home and abroad" [10] (p. 260).

However, these aspects are not voiced in successful ageing discourse, leisure tourism advertisements or sexual education programs for older people, in which penetrative sex still plays an important role in defining one's happiness, sexual health and 'success' in later life [7,12,24–27,31,33–36]. Lessening the focus on penetrative intercourse, and advocating for alternative expressions of sexuality in older age, rather than promoting condom use with fewer partners, may help empower women of all ages to negotiate their sex lives in a way that protects them from sexual abuse, emotional damage and STDs, both at home and abroad [18].

In fact, recent studies have demonstrated that older adults themselves tend to normalise sexual diversity and alternative meanings of sex in later years [7,18,34–36,53–55]. According to Berdychevsky and Nimrod, as people grow older, emotional intimacy, touching and compliments gain more importance, and are regarded as "'nourishment for the soul' and as a context for companionship and a loving relationship" [7] (p. 232). In later years, penetrative sex becomes less significant, while the

need for intimacy, emotional bonding, affectionate expressions and a sense of closeness increase as people grow older [7,18,34–36,53–55]. However, these notions “are missing from the perceptions and definitions of sexual practices in current successful ageing discourse, in which late-life sex is defined in terms of sexual fitness and endorsed under the healthy ageing paradigm” [53] (p. 6). Hence, critically addressing the growing focus on sex in older age as beneficial to one’s physical and psychological health, and redesigning sexual health and ageing policies, may help reduce the risk of STDs, and the peer and social pressure to engage in penetrative sexual activity. Sex-educators and healthcare practitioners should also encourage dialogue in order to overcome the difficulty of discussing sex-related issues and offer alternative narratives of sexuality, that are still seen as a taboo topic among many older individuals [24,53,54].

4. Conclusions

By focusing on the romantic escapes of older female travellers to international sex destinations, this study has encouraged a critical approach to the complex interplay of older women’s sexuality, ageing and psychological wellbeing in later life. It has argued that ageing women, especially the representatives of the baby-boom generation, often turn to romance tourism to recreate their sexual subjectivity, reconnect with their youthful selves, and enhance a sense of self-worth and self-confidence that cannot be often found at home. By reversing age-, race-, class- and gender-related notions that otherwise would be more complicated to challenge in their home spaces, older women undo the narrative of decline and the double standard of ageing, as they show that asexuality and age are not correlated [7,32,34–36,53,55]. Although a variety of travel media, advertising and the model of successful ageing promote sex and active engagement with life as beneficial to both physical and emotional wellbeing, they overlook the fact that the convergence of leisure travel and sex is closely wedded to a higher vulnerability to STDs, sex-related risks, and emotional damage when the holiday fantasy is over. In fact, romance tourism in exotic destinations, together with promotional mass media and the tourism industry, can be even seen as an extension of the discourse of successful ageing in its articulation of sexual pleasure as a means of self-reaffirmation, of propagating anti-ageing ideals, and of actively engaging with life in later years. Therefore, sex and leisure practices in old age should be tackled carefully in order not to create another, rather oppressive ideology among older women. The current sexual health agenda and policies, apart from providing more efficient health information channels and health policies to prevent STDs, sex violence and other sex-related risks within touristic settings, should empower older women and encourage alternative views towards sexual expressions in later years [34–36,53–55]. As Black notes, the “field of travel health/sexuality has much potential to offer to health promotion, sexuality, risk, tourism studies and wider theoretical debates” [10] (p. 262). Ultimately, there is no single paradigm of the interplay between ageing femininities, sex and leisure travel, but many complex, multidimensional and often problematic meanings, that require interdisciplinary investigation and greater communication among researchers working in the fields of leisure tourism, health, age, sexuality, women’s studies and other related disciplines. Hopefully, this paper will serve as an invitation for a deeper examination of the synergy between older women’s sexual expressions, successful ageing and romance tourism, that goes beyond the contemporary western-centred understandings of ageing femininities and the experience of growing older.

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